



# Assassin's Kiss

by Alessa

## Chapter 1

She was a small girl—small and tanned by the unforgiving sun that spoke of countless days spent on the street beneath its unrelenting blaze. Her eyes were the colour of a rabbit's, but with the quickness of a feral cat lurking in the shadows, that flicked towards every movement with suspicious alertness. Inky-black hair framed her dirty but achingly beautiful face as it fell down her shoulders like a raven's wing in long, silk-like tresses. She sneezed, rubbed her little button nose with one dirty hand, and sat, pondering, onto a nearby crate.

She had been given clear instructions by the old man to stay put, a demand that didn't sit well with her. Stupid adults, always thinking they could tell her what to do just because they were bigger. Well, she was faster and smarter, and didn't need to be bigger because she could outsmart any lumbering giant that dared cross her path before they even knew what happened.

She let out a soft, exasperated sigh of restlessness, the kind that only a child can muster when faced with the inexplicable authority of adults. As she sat there, her thoughts swam in a swirl of rebellion and defiance. Her strengths lay not in physical size but in speed and street smarts. A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes—she had a plan brewing in the cauldron of her cunning mind. She had always been the clever one, the quick-witted urchin who could outsmart anyone, no matter their size or age.

She yawned, stretching wiry-muscled arms. Her lithe body twisted, adjusting against the cool stone of the building wall against which she rested. The coldness seeped through her thin linen shirt, sending a shiver down her spine, but she didn't let it deter her. She had grown accustomed to discomfort, weathered it like a seasoned traveller. Shutting her eyes, she dozed in the golden glow of the morning sunlight.

The gnawing emptiness in her stomach was a constant reminder that hunger kept her from relaxing. The old man had promised to bring food, she kept telling herself. Perhaps, she thought, that was the only reason that she was waiting for him. He had promised food, and even more food after that, if she was lucky, if... what had the old man said? If what he saw in her was really there, whatever that meant. Big people are so stupid, the girl laughed in spite of herself. Their understanding is as vast as the narrow eye of a keyhole.

"Why am I even waiting for that idiot?" she mused. The question danced through her thoughts as she contemplated what this old man might see in her that warranted such a suspicious agreement. She rolled her eyes at the thought of grown-ups and their absurd notions. What could he possibly want from

her? There was nothing to her except for what she was—an orphan trying to stay alive; a fierce little eleven-year-old.

She was a little stronger perhaps, a little smarter... No, she corrected herself—significantly stronger and immensely smarter than the ragtag assembly of street kids she competed with every day. Maybe someone had finally noticed her superiority and her greatness. Yes, that's what she was—great, like her majesty the Queen, only greater. A smirk appeared on her little face at the possibility, crinkling up her freckle-covered nose. Yes, she decided; that must be it.

The girl sneezed, crossed her legs and drew her bare feet beneath her. She kept peering through her half-closed eyes and listening for any sign of the old man's approach. He was late. Very late. Didn't he know how hungry she was? How dare he keep her waiting! She was important and special, not some random stray urchin to be tossed a meagre scrap and sent on her way. Her anger simmered as her impatience grew.

She heard a noise, a slight shuffle, and opened one eye just enough to catch a blurred image of its source. Stealthily, she observed without revealing her vigilance to any casual onlooker. It was the old man she was waiting for, and she frowned and opened her eyes, more than a little annoyed that he had ruined her nap. There was nothing she enjoyed more than sleeping in the sunlight as it shone through her eyelids, turning them into a mottled pattern of red and pink, like the tiny petals of the wild flowers in the meadow where she used to play when she was younger.

"Hello," she said coldly.

The old man smiled at her, and the girl sat up, scratching at the dry skin on her bony elbows.

"Hello there," he said in a strong, quiet voice that rose from his smiling lips. "Hungry?"

She nodded, quick and eager at the prospect of finally having some food, and sat forward a bit.

"Well, here you are." He handed her a small loaf of brown bread, which she snatched from his hand without a word.

Sitting cross-legged on the dusty pavement where an alley meets the bustling main street, the girl tore the loaf in half with greedy anticipation. She brought a piece of bread to her nose, inhaling its humble aroma cautiously before stuffing a large bite into her mouth. Her manner of eating was efficient, swift, and tinged with the urgency of one accustomed to their meals being regularly snatched away. In just a few minutes, the loaf was safely confined within the cauldron of her sunken stomach, and when she was done, she meticulously picked every last crumb from her small, tattered shirt, consuming even those morsels. Then, she paused briefly, her eyes flicking up to meet the old man's, and said, "Thank you..." in the most endearing voice she could muster.

As she did so, she looked up at the man with an insolent smirk on her face. He was surprised to see the little waif look him in the face so boldly, meeting his gaze with a challenging, audacious glint that sparkled in her quick eyes. She carried herself with a quiet arrogance that he had never seen before

among the children of the streets, and it intrigued him to no end. He sat quietly opposite her and allowed her to look him over with a level of boldness he had not anticipated.

The old man's eyes were grey, a shade she'd never seen before, and bright. They stared into her with the intensity of a wolf's, neither challenging nor threatening, yet missing nothing. She found herself smirking in response as she inspected him. His face was wrinkled and leathery, with scars crisscrossing his chin, cheeks, and forehead like the jagged lines of forgotten battles that told a story of midnight alleys and clandestine dealings. He wore a close-cut beard, the colour of scattered ash, which had holes in it where the scars marked his chin.

It was apparent to the little girl that, despite being ancient, he possessed a knowledge of self-preservation, a resilience evident in his every movement. As she watched him, it became clear that he was someone to be reckoned with, not an easy mark. Intelligence and experience radiated from him, and despite her innate distrust of grown-ups, she couldn't deny the discerning sharpness that danced in his eyes—a trait not commonly found among the adults she encountered in the harsh reality of the streets.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well what, little one?"

"Well? Do I have what you were looking for?" The little girl seemed annoyed.

"Eager to get off the streets, are we, my little orphan? Hah, I can't say I blame you." He stood smoothly, sliding to his feet like a cat, and the girl reached under her shirt, touching the worn handle of the dagger strapped around her waist.

The old man laughed. "Smart girl. But I don't intend to hurt you. Leave the knife under your shirt where it belongs."

As he approached her, she began to draw the weapon, narrowing her eyes with suspicion.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he said, still coming closer to her until he could touch her little weary face and calm her down. The child decided he wasn't a threat.

"Now, I want to test you," the old man said evenly. "Defend yourself."

He sprang forth with an agile burst, swiftly closing the distance. With a deft move, he caught her in a common hold, his grasp firmly clasping both of her arms. However, no stranger to the art of evasion, the girl was not one to be easily restrained. With a quick, fluid motion, she twisted her way free and, slipping through his grasp like a wisp of smoke, dashed for freedom. The intensity of the chase grew as they sprinted through the dimly lit alley, narrowly evading piles of trash, weaving through oblivious passersby, and sidestepping merchant stalls, until it looked like the pursuit had no end in sight.

But fate had other plans. Just as she thought she might escape, an unseen obstacle tripped her. She tumbled forward, landing face-first on the hard pavement amongst filth and rubble. Panic surged through her as she felt a strong cord tighten around her ankle. It was as if the very shadows conspired

against her. She didn't waste a second; with frenzied determination and a series of frantic kicks, she wrestled her way free from the encroaching entanglement and scrambled to her feet.

However, the old man's tenacity proved unyielding. A strong hand clamped over her mouth, stifling her cries for help, while one arm and one leg held her captive against the cold, unforgiving wall. She struggled and writhed, but it seemed that he was well-versed in the art of submission.

"I'm not impressed, girl," he muttered disappointed, his voice tinged with a chilling calmness. She could feel him relax slightly, possibly preparing to release her, but she wasn't ready to give in. With a surge of determination, she pulled one leg free, twisted her light body, and delivered a swift, calculated strike. Her knee met its target as it slammed against the old man's crotch, and a sharp pain seared through her adversary. The unexpected counterattack caught him off guard, and he grimaced in agony.

The grip on her weakened, offering a fleeting window of opportunity to break free from his hold. Seizing the moment, she stumbled backward, creating precious distance between them, her heart pounding in synchrony with her triumph.

The little girl scrambled away before turning back to laugh at him. "Stupid, stupid man! You can't catch me! You're too big, too slow, and too dumb!" she giggled. "Oh, is that a pouch full of coin? And I think I'll take this knife too!" she sang as she helped herself to his possessions while he lay in pain on the ground.

The old man's hand shot out to catch her wrist, and he whispered, "You passed."

"Passed what? Let go of my arm!" the little girl yelled as she prepared to kick him in the face.

"Hold on, damn it!" he snarled, taking her wrist as he struggled to stand. The girl shouted as he tried to stop her.

"I'm not going to hurt you! Calm down!"

"Then let go of me!"

"Fine," he said, and did so, "but don't run away."

She stood, massaging her arm, poised to run, and waited for him to get up. "You passed," he finally said again.

"Passed what? You damn moron." She began flexing her arm slightly, trying to bring the feeling back.

"If you'll listen to me instead of being smart, I'll tell you."

"Hmph, I can't help it if I'm smart..." she muttered. "You could learn a thing or two from me, y'know?"

Ignoring her, he continued, "You passed my test. You'll do."

"Do what?" the girl snapped.

The old man stood up straight and told her solemnly, "I'm going to train you."

The girl scowled at him and snorted rudely. "I'm not a dog. I don't need to be trained."

He smiled at her, his eyes laughing. "I'm getting old, and I need someone who will take over from me. I'm going to teach you a trade."

"What trade?" she asked, sceptical.

"Assassination."

"You mean killing people? For money?"

He nodded, still bent over from pain.

"Who says I want to?"

His eyebrows shot up at the question, but he didn't answer. "Come with me," he said as he began to walk away.

"Why should I? Where are we going?"

He didn't answer.

"Tell me, or I'll kick you again!" she smirked, laughing.

"That," he said, turning around, "was a cheap shot."

"You're just mad because you lost! There was nothing unfair about it. I don't know what rules you assassins have..."

"Assassins," he corrected, unamused by her continuing defiance.

"...but when you fight *me*, anything goes! Remember that." She smirked at him.

He laughed out loud, unable to help himself. "That's a good attitude to have, little girl. Now come on, we're going to my house. We're going to live together for a while."

She looked as if she didn't believe him. "I'm going to live in a house? And you'll feed me?"

He nodded and started walking down the alley.

"What do I have to do?" She called after him.

"Just learn my trade, that's all."

The little girl smiled broadly and fell into step behind him.

## Chapter 2

The rest of the day had passed slowly, the hours crawling by as the girl wandered aimlessly around the man's modest but cosy dwelling on the fringes of town. She snooped through every room, opening

drawers and cabinets, looking for food, and identifying items of interest that might find their way into her possession. The kitchen was tidy, with gleaming copper pots hanging over the stove and neatly labelled jars of spices lining the shelves. The bedroom contained a simple wooden bed frame and a plain chest of drawers, but no jewellery or valuables worth stealing. She rifled through the man's papers in the study but found nothing of interest.

With a sigh of boredom, the girl gazed out the back window at the flowing creek that ran behind the house, its gentle burbling creating a peaceful backdrop, a stark contrast to the squalid, filthy town streets in which she made her home. Looking west, she could see the deep green edges of Ravenswood Forest, about a mile away. Ancient oak and pine trees beckoning her to explore their shadowy depths and winding paths was something that always intrigued her. She imagined herself venturing into the woods and stumbling upon a hidden cottage or lost treasures buried amongst the tangled tree roots and mossy stones—an instant fortune that would free her from pangs of hunger and the ever-present danger of life on the streets.

Turning eastward, she could catch sight of the horizon, where the azure sea met the sky in an endless embrace under the late afternoon sun. Seagulls circled lazily, their cries faint and distant, like the waves that whispered their stories, hinting at the adventures that lay beyond. She pictured herself strolling along the windswept shore, salt spray kissing her cheeks as she searched for seashells and sea glass.

The girl pressed her hands and forehead against the cool window pane, her breath fogging the glass. The house, nestled between the mysteries of the forest and the allure of the sea, held its own secrets, and she was determined to uncover them.

"This place must've cost a king's ransom..." she said to no one in particular. Her voice echoed off the hardwood walls.

The old man had departed not long after bringing her to this unfamiliar house. His excuse? "Business in the city." But as the door behind him clicked shut, his parting gesture had been to secure all the exits behind him, their heavy bolts clicking into place, imprisoning the little girl within the walls of his home. Left to her own devices, the girl had spent the afternoon wrestling with boredom, her inventive spirit driving her towards mischief and adventure.

In her defiant quest for diversion, she embarked on a curious expedition, first pillaging the kitchen for every blade and knife within reach. One can never have enough weapons, she thought. Armed with her newfound arsenal and a hint of rebellion, she practised throwing them, aiming at a knot of wood in the wall. Its resemblance to the old man's stupid face was close enough to calm her temper for a while. Yet, the ease of this pastime proved to be its downfall. Frustrated by the lack of challenge, she left the room in disarray, the silverware cutlery sticking from the wall like some infernal artwork.

The driving spectre of boredom pressed on, her restless enthusiasm undeterred. Hunger gnawed at her, so she set out on a quest through the dimly lit rooms in search of food. It was a scavenger hunt in pursuit of edible crumbs, but finding nothing especially good, she drank a jug of milk and fell asleep in a puddle of sunlight.

As the sun dipped below the horizon and the day gave way to dusk, the girl stirred, awakened by the protest of her empty stomach. Hunger now drove her, and savage determination kindled in her eyes. She was so hungry, she thought she could eat a damn horse. But there were no horses to be found, and even less allowed themselves to be eaten.

Led by a primal instinct and a feral resolve, she devised a new scheme to silence her growling stomach. She turned to the notion of hunting, and in the dimming twilight, she envisioned a feast born from the pursuit, if not of a horse, than that of a humble mouse. The fireplace, now a potential culinary altar, would bear witness to her unconventional dinner preparations.

With this newfound purpose, she embarked on a methodical search, combing the nooks and crannies of the house for the squirrely rodents. But in her quest to sate her appetite, disappointment became a constant companion. The old man's house appeared to be devoid of the elusive, tiny creatures she sought with feverish urgency.

Frustration welled up, but her street smarts and ingenuity held steadfast. Resourceful and undaunted, she grasped the smallest knife she had lodged into the wall, intent on picking the lock on the back door that stood between her and freedom. Her inexperience, however, got the better of her, resulting in a snapped blade and an even more stubbornly jammed lock—a mishap that only left her furious at her own predicament.

"You stupid old man! I'm hungry!" she shouted. She heard the front door shut quietly and jumped, terrified at the unexpected break in the silence. "Who's there?" she demanded.

"Just me," the man replied. "Come down here, girl. I need to talk to you."

She obeyed, trotting down the stairs, still shocked that she was in a house that had stairs. "Where did you go?"

He was holding an armful of packages, which he placed on the table. "I told you, to the city. I got you some new clothes, and a present." He handed her a heavy object wrapped in brown paper and tied with a string.

She sat down on the floor and began unwrapping it. Her thin hand clenched around the handle of a fine child-sized dagger in a black leather sheath with hand-crafted leather straps for her thin, little waist.

She broke into a triumphant grin and held it up, pointed at the ceiling. "Thank you, thank you!" She removed her old one, rusty and dull, tied around her waist with a length of rope, and strapped on her new gift, then gave the old man a big hug, laughing.

He returned her hug and kissed her cheek. "I expect you to learn how to use it." He sat down and unwrapped another few packages. "Little girl, what's your name?"

She unsheathed the dagger and looked at it in the candlelight. "Wren. What's yours?"

"Klyne." He took out a loaf of bread and handed her half, which she immediately began to devour with her little pink mouth. He chewed his slowly and watched her thoughtfully, then lit a small fire in the fireplace. "Little girl?"



She looked up, her mouth full. "What?"

"How many people have you killed?"

She swallowed, with some difficulty. "What? Why? I..." She looked away. "I don't know. A few."

"How many is a few?"

She shrugged. "Four. But they attacked me! They tried to steal my food! They would've killed me!"

"Only four?"

She put the loaf of bread on the floor, half-eaten. "Five. Six. The sixth one was an accident." She shut her eyes. "Seven. The seventh one I did on purpose. He tried to rob me, as they all do," she swallowed hard and looked away. "I slit his stomach open with this." She poked at her old dagger on the floor. "It took him all afternoon to die. There was a lot of blood."

"Only seven?" he asked.

"Seven children."

"How many adults?" His eyes stared into her, and she couldn't ignore him.

She shrugged. "I don't know. A few."

"How many is a few?"

"Not many." She picked up her rusty dagger and strapped it around her chest, under her shirt. "Why does it matter?"

"Because I can't teach someone who's squeamish about killing," he told her. "But I can't teach a psychopath either."

"I am a psychopath," she said proudly, then picked up her bread from the floor and started eating again. "Even the gang says so."

"No, you're not." He stood. "The guilt in your voice proves it. Now come on, I'll show you your bed."

Wren's face brightened. "I get a bed?"

### **Chapter 3**

As the first rays of morning sunlight filtered through the window, the little girl stirred from her restless slumber, greeted once more by the solitude of the empty house. Beside her bed lay a curious pile of black clothing, each piece neatly folded and waiting for her attention. Eager to unveil the mystery, she

gingerly unfurled the stack, revealing a shirt and breeches fashioned from the finest leather and soft black cotton, each piece tailored to fit her small frame.

A sense of intrigue and delight swept over her as she considered the significance of this unexpected offering. Without hesitation, she disrobed, peeling off the worn and tattered remnants of her previous life, and, with a heart full of anticipation, slipped into the new clothes.

The pants and tunic appeared brand new, crisp, and unworn, their black hue deep and alluring like her hair. The soft fabric caressing her skin was something she wasn't used to, but the most surprising thing of all was that they fit her perfectly, as if the clothes had been crafted with her in mind. They were unlike any garments she had ever seen, let alone owned. They carried with them a faint fragrance, reminiscent of the tailor's shop, a scent that radiated a vision of craftsmanship and attention to detail.

In her newfound attire, she felt a surge of curiosity about her new benefactor and the hidden purpose behind his actions. As she moved about the house, her presence now draped in black, she couldn't help but wonder if being an assassinator was her true calling. After all, she was never afraid of kicking someone's ass, no matter how much bigger they were or how dangerous they looked. Sticking knives into people in return for food in her belly seemed like a good deal to her.

The aroma of breakfast beckoned her. As she descended the creaking wooden stairs, a grin stretching from ear to ear betrayed her delight at the prospect of having food. Her journey to the table revealed a solitary, empty bowl, seated on the worn, wooden surface. Suspended over the crackling hearth, a pot of stew hung suspended from an iron hook, its delicious scent luring her like a starving dog drawn to a bone.

Hungry and eager, she wasted no time. Plopping herself on a rickety chair, she ladled herself a generous portion of the simmering stew until it threatened to overflow her bowl. The rich aroma of meat and potatoes had her senses dancing, and the savoury broth warmed her to the core. Eating as fast as she could shovel the food into her mouth, she ravelled in a symphony of flavours that, until now, only appeared in her dreams.

As she indulged in the hearty meal, her gaze fell upon an unexpected item resting on the table. A note, rather useless because it was utterly unreadable to her, sat there within her reach. Unfamiliar with the written words, she regarded it as a mere piece of parchment, yet her curiosity piqued, and her practicality got the better of her. She decided to put the note to use rather than leave it in limbo. Ever resourceful, she decided to employ it as a makeshift napkin, dabbing away any stray stew remnants from her greasy mouth and sticky fingers. Then, with a full stomach and a mouth-stretching burp, she rolled the paper into a ball and, with a flick of her wrist, tossed it on the floor. The note-turned-ball flew through the house under her kicks, followed by a trail of laughter in its wake.

It was shortly before noon when Klyne burst through the creaking front door, carrying something rather large and wrapped in bloodstained black fabric under one arm. He set it straight on the floor and turned to Wren, his eyes wild.

"What did you do, steal a pig?" the little girl laughed.

"No, I did not steal a goddamned pig! Quick, get me some water!"

Wren looked at him blankly. "Water? Why? What is that thing?"

"Not what," he snarled. "Who."

The cloth, which she now saw to be a cloak, fell away to reveal a young child, about her age, terrified, shivering, and covered with blood.

"Where did you find that?" she asked in disgust. "It's just a kid."

"So are you. Go, get me some damn water. And hurry!"

Returning with a jug of water, Wren carefully studied the child as she approached. Klyne, with a practised hand, attempted to remove some of the dried blood that marred the little girl's fragile body. In her left bloodied hand, the girl clutched a small silver dagger, or at least, Wren believed it to be silver, though it was nearly concealed beneath layers of crimson gore.

The girl's appearance was nothing short of a gruesome spectacle. Her right arm, up to the very shoulder, was drenched in an agglomeration of her own blood, and maybe another's—the telltale sign of a recent battle. Her left arm, up to the elbow, bore a similar macabre testimony of the struggle that had left its mark, and it became increasingly apparent to Wren that the blood was not entirely her own.

As Wren delved into the unsettling scene, the discovery struck her like an icy breeze through her very core. But the chill that raced down her spine was not solely a result of the cold air; it was the recognition of the girl's silent ordeal—the revelation that hinted at a harrowing account of recent violence. It found Wren ensnared in the puzzle of the girl's appalling condition.

Blood-splattered and bearing a multitude of cuts and bruises, the girl's face told a story of fierce battle. Her once-golden-yellow hair, now a ghastly web of recent events, clumped together in the muck of dried blood. It matted one side of her face, like horrifying evidence of the deadly struggle she had recently emerged from.

Amid the tangled mess of her hair and the smears of red upon her face, the girl's silvery blue eyes shone with fear and tenacity that pierced through the chaos gathered behind them. Wren's eyes met hers, like two shadows merging on the wall, recognising in those fearful steel-blue orbs the familiar journey that had brought her to this point.

"So?" she asked. "Who is it, then?"

"Cadie..." the little girl spoke up. "I'm Cadie. I won't let you kill me." Her voice shook a little, and she glanced up at Klyne. "Either of you! I'll kill you first."

The old man poured half of the water over the little girl's head. "I wouldn't have taken you out of there if I wanted to kill you, kid." He began to scrub at her face. "Now clean off that fine dagger of yours and put it away so that I can see if you're hurt."

"I—I'm not hurt," she said softly. "I'm fine. Don't touch me!" She swiped at the old man's face with her weapon. Klyne just caught her hand, disarmed her, and picked her up over one shoulder. Wren was surprised to see that the little girl went limp in his arms.

"Come on, you need a bath and rest," the old man grumbled. "Wren, grab me some soap."

Curious, Wren did so and followed.

Klyne instructed the child to disrobe down to her underwear. The act was a necessity, given the state of her blood-soaked and tattered clothing. Unceremoniously, he flung them into the nearby stream, where they would be cleansed by the rushing waters, bearing the gruesome memories away.

The little girl offered no protest. Silently, she obeyed the old man's directions; her actions guided more by reflexes than thoughts. Her eyes darted furtively to Wren, and when she saw her looking, her cheeks painted aflame with a blush.

With her discarded clothes now soaking in the stream, Klyne pressed on, guiding her to step into the cool waters. She approached the creek with caution, her little bare feet gingerly touching the water's surface. Her gaze remained lowered, seemingly lost in the small ripples forming around her bare toes as the stream's frigid flow sent a shiver coursing through her.

Wren's eyes danced with mirth as she observed Cadie's dishevelled state. Even the young girl's underwear was bloodstained with marks of her recent ordeal—a small detail not lost on Wren. Unable to contain her amusement, she started laughing at the little girl.

"What did you do—get lost in a butcher's shop?" Wren quipped, her tone light and mocking, delivered with playful jest. Cadie, in response, turned an even deeper shade of red, her embarrassment evident in her flushing cheeks.

When Cadie didn't answer, Wren settled herself down on the grass, content to wait and observe her. The strange little girl was of similar height to Wren, bearing a slight frame, thin and weak-looking. Her skin, pale and unblemished, spoke of an aristocratic quality, despite the dried splotches of blood that covered it. The girl was pretty, Wren had to admit, almost captivating, and it annoyed her that the kid was allowed to take the place beside her in Klyne's home just when she was becoming comfortable there herself.

Cadie's eyes were hauntingly large, and when she reached up to wipe away a few tears from them, her fists left rusty stains across her soft, round cheeks. Her hair was pale yellow, the colour of frosted lemons, and was tied in a childish ponytail that cascaded down to her slender shoulders. However, wisps of that golden hair, now caked with drying blood, framed her face, lending a sickening contrast to her otherwise angelic appearance.

Small hands dipped into the creek's crystal-clear water, unfolding as if releasing the memories she had carried in those clenched fists. With a hypnotic sense of determination, she began to meticulously scrape away the dried blood that had clung to her pale skin, flexing her thin fingers in the process. Her

movements were deliberate, a study of methodical compulsion intent on casting away the vestiges of her former life into the waters flowing away from her.

Her gaze, at first marked by shock and then embarrassment, now held a glimmer of curiosity as she occasionally cast her eyes towards Wren. The shame and fear had been replaced by something else—a spark of intrigue that danced in her eyes. Wren, lying beside the creek, was a source of new fascination for her; the charcoal hair and quick brown eyes appeared to her like a curious flower in a strange garden.

In that quiet moment, Wren couldn't help but scrutinise the girl before her. Cadie, in her eyes, appeared an entirely different creature than the one she had witnessed when Klyne had brought her to the house, drenched in gore and bloody grime. Wren's instinctive judgement, honed by years on the streets, took stock of the girl's demeanour. She noted the absence of telltale scars, wounds, and bruises—the signs of hardship etched into the bodies of kids who had struggled for survival on the streets. Cadie, she surmised, did not hail from the same harsh realities as herself.

The girl's thin body, Wren realised, was the result of not working rather than not eating, a distinction that set her apart from the urchins who roamed the alleys in search of their daily bread. Her pallor, while comparable to those afflicted by sickness, was, in fact, the outcome of a life spent indoors rather than a battle with illness. And perhaps most striking of all, the way she moved, with a feline elegance and grace, marked her as something entirely different from the simple, predatory agility of a starving hawk.

Allowing the tranquillity of the moment to wash over her, Wren closed her eyes against the warm caress of the sunlight, surrendering herself to the gentle embrace of new feelings, and began to doze.

## **Chapter 4**

Cadie gazed upon her own reflection in the pinkish water, her eyes tracing the features of her face with an odd sense of detachment. In the rippling mirror, she confronted a dishevelled image that she scarcely recognised. Her once-pristine, wavy blonde hair, a cascade of golden strands that seemed to have been spun from the very essence of sunlight, appeared dirty and tarnished by death itself.

The realisation struck her with a pang of troubling discontent, for her hair had always been a source of pride, a silken mane that shimmered and danced like a veil against her neck when lovingly combed by her mother. Now, it was matted and stained, an incongruous mess that reminded her of recent events with grim foreboding.

How had she gotten blood in her hair? How had she allowed such a transgression to occur? She prided herself on being careful, meticulous even. Her arms, her shirt, her cloak—they were all bespattered with crimson slime, an indelible reminder of the chaos that had unfolded. She hadn't anticipated that

there could be so much blood, and in the frantic struggle, there had been no time for the usual grace and precision she applied to everything else.

In the midst of chaos and peril, there had been no luxury of caution, no time to shield herself from the grim reality that had unfolded. She had been unprepared for the sheer volume of bloodshed, unprepared for the visceral nature of the conflict she had been thrust into. The odd detachment that had settled upon her seemed to blur the line between the two worlds she now lived in—one of grace and beauty, and one of death and carnage, both existing within the same fragile form.

Cadie desperately wanted her dagger back. She felt helpless without it, and it was important that she have it back. The question loomed in her mind—where was it now? Had it been left behind on the floor of that man's house, where he had dropped it when he brought her in? She couldn't say for certain. She was worried that all that blood would make it rust and ruin its edge.

Sitting on a slimy rock by the creek, she focused her attention on her legs, the surface of which bore traces of her ordeal. The sight perplexed her, for she had been clad in long riding breeches during the chaos. She felt a sudden twinge of pain, and the realisation that she must've been wounded sent a shiver down her spine.

"I'm cut," she called out with a wince in her soft, cold voice to the old man who watched her from the hill.

"Is it bad?" Klyne asked her.

The little girl moved her leg, and the pain increased, and she suddenly wished that she hadn't noticed it. It was bleeding a lot—a pink cloud that swirled around in the stream's quick waters.

"Yes," she said.

"I'll come down there and bandage it," the man sighed.

Cadie looked up at him. "But I'm not done washing yet."

"What do you want to do—bleed to death?" Klyne asked.

Cadie heard the old man's words, but they barely registered. She stood there, her gaze fixed on her own blood, entranced by its graceful dance as it swirled and ebbed away in the swift, cold waters of the creek. The old man's words were mere whispers at the edge of her consciousness, like a faint echo of the wind in a distant forest.

"Bleed to death?" The thought tugged at the fringes of her mind, and a touch of curiosity flickered within her. She pondered the concept. Could people truly bleed to death? Her experiences had never offered such a spectacle, for she had never witnessed someone succumb to blood loss as a direct cause of their demise. In her world, blood appeared as a byproduct of death, a haunting reminder of the life that had once flowed through the veins of the departed, much like crows gathering around a lifeless carcass.

A soft, almost dreamy laugh escaped her lips, a sound that seemed to agree with the absurdity of the notion. Even she, as young as she was and with her limited experiences, recognised the fundamental truth—blood was a consequence, not a catalyst, of death. It was a lot like the vultures she had observed, drawn to the aftermath of death but never the agents of it. Despite the yucky nature of dried blood and the necessity of washing it away, she couldn't help but find a certain beauty in the process, much like the allure of those crows she had come to understand.

Cadie's thoughts, like ripples on the creek's surface, stirred with the haunting memories of her past. She missed her mother. She was dead, though. Cadie missed her father, but he was dead too. A sense of emptiness pervaded her soul. She felt the weight of their loss keenly. It was like a dark shadow that followed her everywhere—a harsh reality, but the one she had grudgingly come to accept.

She considered the manner of their deaths and whether they had bled to death. In her young mind, she contemplated the notion of people dying without their heads, a gruesome image that filled her with horror. Her father had bled; she remembered that vividly, and so did she, a lot. The starkness of those memories had etched themselves into her soul, and she could not escape the darkness they held.

She wondered if the blood of royalty was somehow different from that of common folk. Her father had once said that the blood of kings and queens carried a divine quality. But Cadie held a different belief. She couldn't detect any difference in the scent of their blood; it all smelled the same to her. Her father thought that everything about royalty was better, but her mother always said that it was because he was a king and he couldn't help it. She would say that and laugh and crinkle up her eyes, and it would always make Cadie smile.

Her reminiscence took a dark turn, back to her mother crying before the men had killed her. She recalled the tears that had mingled with blood on her face. When Cadie killed the man—when she killed all of them—they hadn't cried, though. They had only gasped or yelled. None of them had cried like her mother.

Cadie stood in the bloody stream and wished silently that this day had never happened.

"What's wrong with her?" Wren asked Klyne in innocent awe of the child transfixed by the sight of her own blood.

"There's nothing wrong with me," Cadie protested, her voice dim and distant.

"Then why are you standing in the water like that?" she asked her. But Cadie didn't answer her, and she wondered if she had even heard her. She turned to Klyne. "I'll go get her out. Hold on."

She took off her shirt and shoes and jumped in, surprised at how cold the water was, and how red. Most of the blood had drifted downstream, though, because the spot where Cadie stood was clear.

"Come on, Cassie," she said, putting a hand on her little shoulder. "You're all clean."

"My name is Cadie," she told her in a detached, even tone. "And I'm not clean. My hair is dirty."

With a hint of ever-present mischief dancing in her eyes, Wren regarded Cadie with a sly smile. "Hmmm, so you're right!" she chimed in, acknowledging the obvious in the girl's words. She didn't

dwell on it, though, for she had other plans in mind. Her strong fingers grasped Cadie by the nape of her neck, and with surprising swiftness, she dunked the girl's head beneath the water's surface.

The clear mountain stream splashed over them both, and for a brief moment, the world was nothing more than a cold, watery embrace. When Wren released her hold, Cadie surfaced, her silver eyes now crystal-clear and aware of her surroundings.

With practised efficiency, Wren lathered her hands with soap and began to scrub at the girl's hair, her fingers moving deftly through her golden tresses like a comb made of flesh. Cadie, in turn, relaxed instantly, calmed by the rhythmic scrubbing at the hands of the strange girl beside her, who appeared to her as wild as a feral cat. As Wren's hands worked through the strands, crimson soap bubbles trickled down Cadie's pale face.

Another dunk followed, this time to rinse the soap from her hair, and Cadie displayed no resistance. In fact, she appeared to trust Wren implicitly as the little girl washed the dirt from her hair. Wren extended her hand, and they waded back towards the creek's mossy bank.

"Can people really bleed to death?" Cadie asked her.

"Yes, they can," she told her.

"How do you know?"

"Because I made someone bleed to death once. It takes a long time, though, so don't worry."

"Okay."

## **Chapter 5**

While Cadie obediently allowed herself to be bandaged, Wren lay in the sun and slept, trying to dry off. She stretched out on the grass, her eyelids closed against the sunlight that tickled her skin.

As Wren basked in the soothing rays of the sun, Klyne picked up the bandaged Cadie and carried her back home. The little girl lay cradled in his arms, still bearing the traces of her washing in the creek. Her wet hair, a sparkling cascade of lemonade, dripped steadily onto the old man's clothing, forming a stain that spread slowly like an inkblot on a canvas.

Walking behind them, Wren remained her usual brooding and sulking presence. More than once, Klyne cast wary glances over his shoulder, worried that she might have chosen to linger behind, dozing in the grass or playing in the creek. However, each time he turned to check, he found her there, her gaze fixed intently on the child in his arms, her thoughts obscured by a pensive veil.

The water continued to dribble from Cadie's drenched hair and feet, leaving in its wake a constellation of tiny, glistening puddles that marked their path back home. As they walked, Wren trailed behind,



deliberately stepping into the chilled puddles in their wake, the sensation sending a shiver up her spine. Her feet, caked with the mud she had gathered before entering the house, remained untouched and uncleaned. The newcomer's undue attention hoarding had made her even more sullen than her natural predisposition warranted. Suddenly, making herself presentable became an inconceivable notion, even more so when Klyne eventually placed Cadie down at home and the space she occupied soon transformed into a small pool of water.

"Wren, go get me a towel," he ordered her.

Feeling a familiar sigh escape her lips, Wren considered the request. She wouldn't be staying here for very long if this kept up, no matter the abundance of food or how comfortable the house was. Her freedom, like that of a wild bird, was something she cherished above all else. Food could never be enough of a temptation, and certainly not during the springtime. It was a time when the world opened its arms to adventure and possibilities, and she had no intention of letting it slip away.

In the winter, perhaps, when times grew tough and the world took on a harsher tone, she might consider such an arrangement. But for now, the world was her playground, and she intended to savour every moment of it. She glanced at Klyne, her eyes holding resentment and doubt about her future.

"Yes, master," she grumbled. "Here I go, your obedient servant."

"Oh, shut up."

"Yes, sir! Here I go, sir! Anything else you want, sir?" She gave him a mock-salute.

"I want you to be quiet and bring me that towel," the old man said, still worried about Cadie.

"Yes, sir! Right away, sir!" Wren heeded Klyne's request and quickly covered the distance of five steps before collapsing into laughter. She laughed carefree, the way she used to when playing pranks with other street kids. She scampered up the stairs on all fours, her movements agile and unrestrained, as she sought to find a blanket or something and returned with a dry rag.

Together, Klyne and Wren towelled the child dry, their combined efforts ensuring the little girl was no longer damp from the cold mountain water. However, Cadie was not content to remain passive in the process. Squirming with all her might, she managed to wriggle free from the big man's grasp.

"Where is my dagger? What have you done with it?" she asked, still shivering from the cold but unfazed. "I need my dagger."

Her eyes finally locked onto the dagger that Klyne had tossed away from her earlier. A determined spark reflected in her sapphire gaze.

"It must be kept dry," she was resolute. "Or it will rust."

Klyne, after a moment of contemplation, relented with a sigh. "Well," he muttered with an air of resignation, "you might as well keep it."

He wrapped Cadie in a quilt, placing her beside the fireplace, hoping that the warmth it provided would make the little girl fall asleep. If there was anything she needed right now, it was a chance to rest and recover from what was undoubtedly an eventful day for her.

He watched her for a while; however, the allure of sleep did not seem to work its magic just yet. Cadie remained alert, her inquisitive eyes flitting around the room like a scared squirrel. In an attempt to coax her into rest, Klyne offered her a bowl of warm soup. He watched with a fond smile as she tried to eat while firmly clutching her dagger in her little fist, displaying a fierce determination to hold onto the weapon that provided her safety.

"I want some food, too." Wren's insistent whines for dinner reminded Klyne of her presence. "Slaves must eat from time to time," she reminded him, a flicker of irritation dancing in her eyes, "or they'll drop dead, or even better, run away."

With a languid indifference, Klyne glanced her way. "You're not a baby, Wren. Help yourself," he retorted in exasperation. He pushed an empty bowl in her direction, an invitation she seized with a begrudging grumble, while her movements carried the weight of habitual discontent.

Eventually, as the fire crackled and its warmth enveloped the room, the soothing combination of the soup and the snug quilt began to take its toll. With her stomach content and her body cocooned in warmth, Cadie surrendered to the irresistible call of slumber. Her eyelids drooped, and with a final, sleepy glance at her dagger, she succumbed to the embrace of a deep, restful sleep.

Klyne gazed down at the sleeping form of the little girl with disbelief and profound wonder etched across his features. It was difficult to reconcile the image of this tiny, innocent child resting by the fireplace with the harrowing memory of the very same child he had found amidst the gruesome aftermath of a battle surrounded by the butchered remains of nine fully grown, well-trained men, each one gutted or shredded, dismembered, or with their throats brutally cut.

The memories surged back to him like a relentless torrent of rain. It all began one late November evening, when none other but the Royal Messenger arrived at his door. The man's glowering face was disfigured with disgust for having to breach his door, but his eyes weighed down by the heavy burden of news he bore. Klyne knew, as soon as the pretentious little man stepped inside, that it was all about Lord Zaros.

Lord Zaros, a name that resonated throughout the kingdom like an ominous refrain, a sinister symphony of aristocratic influence and dark dealings. A man who walked a treacherous path, perpetually dancing on the razor's edge of legality, always teetering on the brink of moral abyss. He was a figure shrouded in mystery, a shadowy silhouette that cast its ominous presence over the realm.

Zaros was a master of intrigue and a virtuoso of deceit. Illicit activities were his preferred trade, a realm where he held dominion. His fingers were dipped in countless clandestine schemes, and his pockets were brimming with the ill-gotten gains of his nefarious enterprises. But what made him truly untouchable was not just the cunning of his machinations but his lofty status as a nobleman. The cloak

of nobility was his shield, a shield that warded off the claws of justice, deflecting the arrows of accountability.

Even the law, with all its blind eyes and folded palms, dared not tread too close to Lord Zaros's domain. He was protected not just by his title, but by a cadre of hired guards who were as loyal to their lord as they were ruthless to those who sought his downfall. The very walls of his opulent mansion seemed to whisper secrets, harbouring truths that were known but never spoken, tales of corruption and power abused.

In the shadows of a kingdom rife with intrigue and treachery, Zaros's malevolent ambitions knew no bounds. His criminal enterprises had swelled in audacity, reaching a crescendo that sent shivers down the spines of even the most stalwart souls. It was whispered in hushed tones that he was financing a heist of unprecedented proportions—a daring raid that had the audacity to target the very heart of the kingdom—the crown jewels themselves. Such a brazen act, a direct affront to the monarch and a threat to the realm, could not be tolerated.

In the dimly lit chambers of the Royal Guard, the Captain paced restlessly, consumed by the mounting whispers of Lord Zaros's sinister plan. He knew that the kingdom teetered on the precipice of calamity, and the traditional channels of law and justice were woefully inadequate to quell the storm that loomed on the horizon. Something drastic had to be done.

The Captain's thoughts converged on a name that had been whispered in the darkest corners, the name of a shadowy figure, a man whose reputation painted him as an assassin of unmatched skill and unrivalled success. This man was only known by the name of Klyne. Discreetly, he sent word, a coded message that sought a clandestine meeting, a parley that would remain hidden from prying eyes.

In a hushed rendezvous, the Captain and Klyne met in a room that bore witness to countless secrets. There was no preamble, no polite pleasantries. The Captain, a stern figure of authority, cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"Lord Zaros's latest machinations have cast a long and ominous shadow over our realm. His designs are perilous, and his intentions are a threat to the very heart of our kingdom. His gang of marauders must be eliminated before they can unleash their nefarious plot, and yet the law, as it stands, is powerless against him."

Klyne, a master of disguise and subtlety, remained enigmatic, his features obscured by the shroud of mystery. His voice was a whisper that betrayed no emotion as he responded, "Go on."

The Captain's words were grim, a reflection of the dire straits they faced. He squirmed, he smirked, he hawked, and spat on the stone floor. "I have a task that demands your unique talents, a task that lies outside the boundaries of legality. You must eliminate Lord Zaros's hired gang before they can pilfer the royal treasures, or worse, bring harm to the very heart of the kingdom, our royals. In exchange for your service, a substantial bounty will be awarded, and your... activities... shall be overlooked. The kingdom's fate lies in your hands, Klyne. Will you take up this offer?"

Klyne understood what was being asked of him. To protect the crown from the shadows. He had ventured into the palace room on the night of the planned heist, a mere six moons since being approached by the Captain, the grandeur of the castle surrounding him, only to be greeted by an eerie silence. His initial assumption had been that the room had been held by a royal guard of exceptional skill, for the stillness seemed to speak of their prowess. However, a slight movement, almost imperceptible in the dim light, had caught his eye.

There, at the heart of the carnage, stood a tiny figure clad in blue and black, her almost entire body stained with a deep, foreboding red. She stood shakily, her delicate fingers prying themselves free from one of the fallen men. It was a sight that shook Klyne to his core. Even in the many years of his deadly trade, he had never seen such a spectacle of violence and vulnerability juxtaposed against one another.

For a long moment, Klyne remained transfixed, too astounded to think or react. The little girl, her silver eyes assessing the bloodied carcasses surrounding her, seemed to be ensuring that the threat had been vanquished. In that instant, the significance of the royal insignia on her tunic became abundantly clear. It was a revelation that struck him like a thunderbolt—this child was a princess.

"Who are you?" A voice like ice cut through the silence. It took Klyne a moment to realise that it had come from the little girl. "I won't let you kill me."

"I don't want to kill you, little one." Klyne said. "I'm going to help you."

"Why would you help me? I don't believe you. Who are you?"

"A friend." Klyne stepped through the room, hearing a soggy splash of bloody gore beneath each footstep. "I'm going to get you out of here. I'll protect you."

The girl sat down on the floor amidst the filth and slimy entrails of dead men. "They killed my mother," she said.

For the first time, Klyne noticed the body of a slight, thin woman in the corner; her golden hair spilled around her like sand from a broken hourglass, the royal insignia standing out clearly on her dress, and that's when he realised that his age had finally caught up with him. His mission had failed—he was too late.

He knelt down, and the little girl hugged him, shivering. "They killed my mother, and they wanted to kill me too, but I killed them. Everyone wants to kill me, and I want my mother..."

In the end, it turned out the little girl had finished the job for him, but one thing she couldn't do was save the Queen. She seemed about to cry, but somehow stopped the tears from spilling down her pale, round cheeks. That was when Klyne noticed the fresh blood trickling down the girl's leg. He picked her up and ran. The child went limp in his arms.

## Chapter 6

"Will she live here?" Wren asked him suddenly, her quick eyes full of curiosity and suspicion turned their attention back to Klyne while munching on a piece of dry bread crust she had discovered in the kitchen.

Klyne nodded. "Zaros's men are looking to kill her. She has nowhere else to go. She's sharing your bed from now on."

"Hear that, Cassie? You're living here now, with me." Wren relayed the news to Cadie with an air of authority and excitement. Cadie looked up at her with eyes sleepy from the exhausting day, but said nothing.

Wren found her interesting and very pretty. She also thought that she would be very fun to play with, even though she seemed to be a natural attention thief. In her young mind, she could already envision the exciting adventures and hijinks they might embark on together, and all the stunts and tricks she could teach her.

Her daydreaming was interrupted when Klyne, practical as always, set Wren to work cleaning the bloodstains from the floor, the same spot where he had first brought Cadie home. She grumbled as she scrubbed the remnants of the dreadful memory, the ever-begrudging worker, as the last hints of sunlight vanished from the evening sky. At the same time, Cadie dozed by the fireside, not entirely asleep but resting in the tranquil warmth of her new sanctuary.

"Go to bed, girls, both of you." Klyne told them as the stars came out. "You've had a rough day. I'll talk to you tomorrow, bright and early."

Wren sighed. *she* hadn't had a rough day, and *she* wasn't tired, but she looked at the little girl by the fireside and realised that she must be. "Come on, Cassie, let's go," she said, taking her slender hand in hers.

"I'm not Cassie," Cadie muttered sleepily. "Where are we going?"

"To sleep."

Cadie, with her hair tousled and drifting carelessly over her eyes, stood up and started walking behind Wren with a sense of detachment. She followed a path charted by the other girl's footsteps, like a leaf caught in the inexorable flow of a turbulent river. The small, silent sobriety of the moment was not lost on Klyne as he watched the little girls holding hands while cautiously ascending the staircase. They moved with a graceful, almost feline poise, their steps light, almost ghostly, as if treading on shared secrets of childhood buried beneath the muted footfalls.

Klyne's gaze, however, was not on them, but on the fleeting moments of his own younger days that they inadvertently resurrected. Memories and sensations began to resurface like fragments of a forgotten dream, bringing a wistful smile to his lips. He had been so much like Wren, he mused... so

cocky, so sure that he was better, stronger, smarter, faster... He'd lived to improve that, to know that his strength was unmatched, that no one could ever hurt him again.

With the passage of time and the burden of experience, he now saw the folly of his youthful arrogance. Yet, it had been a crucial part of the journey, driving him to conquer his fears and prove to himself what others had doubted.

The bedroom the girls shared, although small, was snug and full of warmth and character. It was bedecked by stolen trinkets—the loot Wren plundered from street merchants and unsuspecting strangers—and then scattered around the room until it resembled a realm of childhood dreams and hidden treasures—a sanctuary that provided her with shelter from the uncertainties of the outside world.

Cadie perched precariously on the very edge of the bunk bed, her little feet dangling hesitantly over the side, her bare toes not quite touching the floor. She appeared on the brink of falling off, like a baby bird about to take flight for the very first time. In one hand, she still gripped her precious silver dagger, its hilt pressing into her lap. The other hand held the blanket, clutched tightly as if she were clinging to the edge of the world. Her forlorn gaze was fixed on the floor, lost in her own thoughts.

"I even have two blankets!" Wren chirped cheerfully in stark contrast to Cadie, her voice brimming with oblivious delight and boundless enthusiasm while she strode around her self-proclaimed kingdom. "One is so thick, I use it in winter when it gets stupidly cold in here. If you're not careful, your eyeballs will freeze in a second! That's how cold it gets..."

Wren watched the troubled girl with curiosity and concern. Cadie, seemingly in her own world, moved in the hushed stillness of the room and quietly shed her layers of clothing, her silhouette briefly obscured by the inky shadows. Slipping her thick black shirt and breeches, she finally revealed herself in her undershirt, a material of such elegant design and infinite softness that it seemed almost otherworldly to Wren's inexperienced eyes. It was as though the very essence of luxury had been woven into the threads.

In contrast to Wren's jubilant presence, Cadie appeared distant, lost in her thoughts. She didn't seem to hear Wren's soft-spoken words when she called her name, nor did she seem to notice the curious gaze that lingered on her.

Wren moved to the other edge of the bed and began the process of kicking off her own shoes. The sound of her actions, though harmless, caused Cadie to twitch. She turned abruptly in response, with the dagger squeezed tightly in her hand and pointing in the direction of the sound, while her eyes filled with anxious alarm. Once she realised that the noise posed no threat, she turned her gaze back to the floor, as if it were her refuge from the recent tragedy that had ravaged her life.

Confused by the enigmatic reaction of her new housemate, Wren decided to remain silent. She extinguished the candle's flame, cloaking the room in darkness, and then slipped under the blanket, creating a small but shared sanctuary in which the two girls could find solace for the night.

In the veil of darkness that enveloped the room, Wren sensed, rather than saw, the little girl's movements. She felt the subtle shift of the mattress and heard the delicate rustle as Cadie gradually inched her way towards the middle of the bed, followed by the soft pull of the covers over her small frame. When Cadie lifted the blanket, a rush of cold air flowed inside their small realm, sending a shiver through Wren's body. But soon, the gentle warmth emanating from Cadie's body quickly erased the chill, making Wren's quivers settle in response.

Cautiously inching closer to Cadie, Wren sought to bask in the soothing warmth that radiated from her. However, as she drew near, Cadie instinctively retreated further from her. Respecting her need for solitude, Wren settled back into her own portion of the bed, content to give Cadie the privacy she seemed to desire.

As the minutes passed, Wren's eyes adapted to the darkness, allowing her to peer at Cadie in silence. The little girl appeared to be huddled into a protective ball and shivering. Her face was concealed against her drawn-up knees. Only the silver gleam of her dagger remained a steadfast presence, held tightly in her grasp.

Wren sighed, her nerves still on edge. This was a new experience for her—sharing her bed with a companion—and every uneven breath, every slight shift, caused her to startle. She hoped Cadie wasn't the type who kicked in her sleep. As time passed, the warmth of Cadie's increasingly steady breathing began to lull Wren into a state of restless sleep. She welcomed the soothing embrace of drowsiness—the veil that blurred the edges of her consciousness.

It was in the midst of this uneasy slumber that she received an unexpected surprise. In the pitch-blackness, Cadie extended her arms, enfolding Wren in an embrace. The sudden contact was so unexpected that it left Wren in a state of astonishment.

Before Wren could even register it, before she could even do anything about it, the little girl hugged her tightly to herself. She clung to Wren in the darkness, her face concealed beneath the soft layers of the blanket, while her small body trembled with what could only be the memory of her recent trauma and unending fear.

Initially taken aback by the suddenness of it all, Wren swiftly overcame her surprise. "Don't be afraid, Cadie. I'll protect you." Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around her new companion, drawing Cadie close to her as if knowing exactly what she needed. In that instant, their roles had reversed, and Wren found herself helplessly clinging to Cadie like a scared kitten seeking refuge in her arms.

A dawning realisation swept over her that Cadie must have been frightened out of her mind after enduring the nightmare she had been through. The little girl shuddered uncontrollably, and only muffled whimpers escaped her trembling lips. With a sudden awareness, Wren felt a warm wetness near her shoulder and realised that Cadie was crying. She felt the tears, too, burning at the edges of her own eyes—tears from what, she wondered? Sympathy for Cadie's suffering? Fear for what lay ahead of them? Or a growing understanding that their fates were now inextricably intertwined.

Cadie's arms wrapped around Wren's waist were delicate and seemingly fragile. But beneath the layer of baby fat resided stringy muscles, while her soft white skin allowed Wren to feel the contours of her delicate bones.

Cadie appeared frail and weak, quivering like a leaf caught in the March wind, all the while whimpering like a kitten. "Mother, mother, I want my mother..." she repeated in a strangled voice, pushing her face up against Wren and nuzzling against her shoulder. Her hair fell into her eyes, dishevelled and matted, and the stale, lingering smell of blood clung to her like an old scar, intermingling with the taste of desperate tears and the faint trace of stream water.

In turn, Wren clung to Cadie, holding her tightly in her own arms, until the little girl had cried herself to sleep. But even in her dreams, Cadie's trembling and uneven gasps persisted, keeping Wren awake for most of the night.

Surprisingly, as Wren gazed at Cadie's face in the soft moonlight, she didn't mind the sleepless night. She had grown fond of Cadie. It was a love that had sneaked into her heart unbidden, stirring emotions that danced like fireflies in her tummy. As she held the hand of her newfound companion in the boundless dark, their bond deepened with each passing moment, forever intertwining their destinies in the quiet depths of the night.

## Chapter 7

In the wake of that fateful night when Cadie found refuge in her new home, three summers have come and gone, marked by calloused fingers learning silent ways to choke the life from men—three summers of rigorous practice and relentless pursuit of skills needed for survival, stealth, and silent killing. The assassin duo honed their abilities with unwavering determination, creating a lethal partnership that operated in the shadows with unparalleled proficiency and cunning.

Their exploits became the stuff of rumours and tales among the townsfolk; stories passed on whispered tongues from ear to ear with fear and fascination. Some called them by a gruesome name, the Urchins of Death. However, for most, they were simply known as the Grimgirls—two small demons who could end a life as quickly and silently as a summer pestilence.

The Grimgirls, elusive and stealthy, had successfully maintained their invisibility, for their presence had never been witnessed in the harsh glare of daylight. All that marked their passage was a body growing cold, and coin left in grateful thanks for silent deaths. Their reputation soared to mythical heights, and their services demanded an astronomical price, which mirrored the unparalleled skill and precision they brought to each assignment.

Over the span of more than twenty moons since their first kill, the duo's livelihood has bloomed richer than the roses that once grew in the Queen's garden. Wren, burdened by the uncertainty of her next



meal in the past, now found herself comfortably removed from the necessity of pickpocketing wallets from unsuspecting strangers. The transformation wasn't lost on Wren, and it only served to boost her already formidable sense of pride and arrogance.

But darker shades haunted Cadie's eyes. Though she, too, regained some luxurious habits from her previous life that were slashed away by the knife's edge, the spectre of her mother's death never left her. Memories, like a haunting reminder of a past that lingered in the recesses of her mind, cast shadows on even the most vibrant moments of her life. Even amid the newfound success and relative prosperity, the ghosts of the girls' shared histories persisted, intertwined with the deadly dance they orchestrated in the shadows.

And Klyne, when he wasn't immersed in imparting the lethal art of slaying to the girls, his days were consumed by the ceaseless tide of job offers that inundated him. Word of the Urchins' grim talents had spread far like a wind-borne disease, bringing endless missives carrying demands as dire as the threats within. Landed lords and thieves alike sought the deaths only Wren and Cadie could broker, till messages mounted like the stinking dead after the plague, near overwhelming Klyne's stern resolve. Rumours had seeded crops bitter as nightshade, and now the harvest called its due.

The continuous deluge of opportunities and challenges tested Klyne's advancing age, pushing the boundaries of his cunning and wearing down his endurance. The world beyond their clandestine operations seemed to be in perpetual motion, a maelstrom of conflicting interests and potential dangers. Klyne found himself daily navigating a serpent's nest of shifting loyalties and ready daggers, of alliances, betrayals, and the ever-present spectre of those who sought to exploit the formidable skills of the Grimgirls.

Yet amidst the incessant chaos, he remained a stalwart figure, a mastermind orchestrating the delicate dance of death that unfolded under the cloak of night. His girls were steel made flesh, guided by his dark mastery, and his unwavering determination and strategic prowess were the linchpin that held the trio together, ensuring that they continued wielding their deadly artistry with unmatched precision.

It was the same on that crisp September morning when Klyne, with a sigh that seemed to carry the apprehension of countless missions, unfolded a meticulously drawn map on the finest vellum. The sprawling layout depicted the grandeur of a palace nestled atop the hills, surrounded by lavish gardens and orchards overlooking the affluent quarters of the town.

Glowing candles illuminated the wooden table as he addressed the girls, their shadows flickering in the dim light on the stone walls behind them.

"Alright, you two, listen up!" he accentuated his words by bringing more candles to the table, the soft glow casting an eerie ambience in the room. "The rumour mill suggests that Lord Zaros is back in town, bolstered by a new contingent of mercenaries and hired guards. He's hellbent on regaining power over the monarchy through blood, and we've been tasked with planning our next move against him, with the ultimate goal of taking him out once and for all. This time, we cannot afford to fail, and we definitely cannot allow him to unleash another bloodbath."

His words drifted as dark as a raven's wing, palpable in his stern expression like shadows painting the stone walls while candles guttered out their blackened smoke. The importance of the situation hung in the air like death itself.

Cadie leaned in attentively, her sapphire eyes drinking deep the promise of vengeance. Meticulously, she absorbed and studied every intricate detail etched onto the map, while her feet swang carefree beneath her. The anticipation that had been building within her for this very moment signalled the opportunity for payback. A chance to avenge her mother's death had materialised, and now she was once again poised on the precipice of action.

Beside her, Wren adopted a more casual stance, sliding into a chair backwards, her chin lazily resting on folded arms. Her gaze lingered on the candle flames that danced across the familiar layout of the palace and its surroundings. Though seemingly carefree, her demeanour concealed the keen awareness that defined her every move.

"I've obtained new information on the layout of Lord Zaros's palace," Klyne began, his finger tracing a careful path along the twisting corridors depicted on the map. "His private quarters are nestled in the west tower, with a solitary entrance on the third level. And over here," he gestured across the hall, "you'll find the guards' armoury. It would be wise to assume it's attended at most times."

The ever diligent and poised, Cadie absorbed the information with a nod of thoughtful agreement. "The tower may pose a greater challenge for access, but it provides the element of surprise. Few would expect intruders so high up. Also..." She swept the wisps of golden hair behind her ear and looked at Klyne, standing next to her. "Striking at night would be the best option."

"Correct," said Klyne. "Our goal is to hit him where he least expects and escape without being seen. So, how do you propose we infiltrate the tower unseen?"

Wren yawned widely. "Just march in the front gate." She stretched out and waved the worries off like flies with her hand. "By the time they realise I'm not a guard, ol' Zaros will be pushing up daisies with my dagger in his throat."

Klyne sighed in exasperation. "Stealth is key, not bravado. Think, girl—how would you quietly breach the palace defences under cover of darkness? You are forgetting that these are trained guards, not peasants with pitchforks."

The little black-haired girl examined her dirty fingernails, unconcerned. "I work better in daylight. Sneaking around at night is for cowards."

Klyne's eyes flashed dangerously, but Cadie interjected before he could retort. "What of the servant entrance on the northern wall? It appears narrow but less guarded than the main gates."

Klyne nodded with a measure of approval, acknowledging Cadie's consistent and thoughtful dedication to their work. Day by day, she managed to surprise him, exhibiting a seriousness that set her apart. In contrast, Wren retained her defiant nature, perpetually questioning orders and casting doubt on plans.

Klyne recognised echoes of his younger self in Wren. She was a reflection of his own impulsive tendencies. Yet despite that, he couldn't help but believe that if Wren could rein in her impulsive nature, she had the potential to surpass even Cadie in skill and capability. The art of killing was his second nature, but the delicate balance between discipline and individuality playing out between the girls was something that confused him beyond all understanding.

"A sensible option," he acknowledged Cadie, while Wren sulked in her seat. "From there, you could access the tower stairs without being seen by guards."

Klyne turned to Wren expectantly. She frowned at his questioning eyes, drumming fingers on the table, seemingly annoyed at not having her idea accepted. "Fine, we slip in after midnight through the rats' tunnel. Then what?"

"We'll need to avoid detection on the stairs," mused Cadie. "Perhaps one creates a distraction in the hallway while the other strikes?"

Klyne traced potential routes with a finger. "Yes, it's possible, but risky if discovered while you're separated. I'd prefer both of you rush Zaros at once for speed and strength of numbers."

Wren smirked with pride. "Oh, please, you know that Cadie can't keep up with me. I'll deal with Zaros myself. He won't even know what hit him."

Cadie shot her a stern look. "Alone is too dangerous, even for your skill. Together, we stand the greatest chance of success... and survival."

Her serious tone gave Wren pause. She couldn't deny the truth in Cadie's words, and she'd hate it too if she had to part from her on the job. They always worked together, no matter what. It was a pact forged through countless challenges. If one faltered, the other was there to provide support. But more than that, she knew she would worry herself sick if something happened to Cadie and she wasn't by her side. It wasn't just about efficiency; it was about ensuring each other's safety. The idea of facing the perils of the mission alone didn't sit well with either of them.

After a brief contemplation, Wren leaned back, her eyes tracing the patterns in the low ceiling beams. "Fine, we both rush him together. But I call the killing blow!" Her words carried the bravado that defined her, even in the face of a perilous mission.

Ignoring her flippancy, Klyne pressed on. "Once Zaros is dealt with, what is the escape plan? How do you get out, and how much time do you have?"

"The stairs and servant halls back to the northern tunnel," said Cadie promptly.

"Too slow," Wren scoffed. "The guards would be all over us like a rash. I'll find us a quicker route. Maybe through the ballroom windows..."

"Absurd," Klyne cut in sharply. "Speed is secondary to avoiding detection. Your recklessness will see you caught or killed. For once, Wren, think beyond your ego!"

She folded her hands in a show of defiance, but Cadie spoke before another argument could erupt. "The marshes outside offer sure escape, even under moonlight, if we avoid guards. From there, a league to the west, Klyne is waiting for us with horses."

Klyne nodded in approval. "A sound fallback. But we prepare for all possibilities—guards, delays, injuries. Alternate routes and rendezvous points in case of separation. Nothing can be left to chance. We anticipate every scenario and contingency. Only then will I feel confident in your chances for success."

Cadie nodded solemnly. "What other preparations must we make?"

Klyne straightened his back, then started rolling up the map of Lord Zaros's palace before hiding it behind the bookshelf. "Supplies, for one. Rope, grappling hooks, lockpicks..."

"And snacks!" Wren interjected with a mischievous grin. "Can't do stealth on an empty stomach."

Cadie ignored her, focused on the practical. "We'll also need clothing to blend in as servants. And bandages, in case of injury."

Klyne rose, stretching his tired muscles. "See to gathering what we need by noon. Then we'll spend the afternoon honing our skills." His eyes fell meaningfully on Wren.

Wren huffed to herself, but for once she did not argue. "As if I need more practice putting arrows through throats," she grumbled under the chin before slipping out of the room.

The sun bled its light across the western hills as the shadows yawned and stretched, eager to swallow the land. The trio paid the fading light no mind, immersed as they were in readying themselves for the coming night. From dusk until full darkness, they honed their skills, practising the lethal dance that could mean the difference between life and the death's cold embrace.

Cadie moved with the fluid grace of a little dancer, her youthful form twisting and spinning through the familiar patterns of combat. Yet for all her natural elegance, this was no playful frolic—each motion flowed seamlessly into the next, carrying the promise of swift, steel-kissed death. She lost herself in the movements, finding solace in their routine amidst the nearing terrors of the approaching night.

In contrast, Wren's footwork betrayed a hint of sloppiness. Eagerness, or perhaps overconfidence, left openings that Klyne, ever the watchful mentor, was quick to exploit. Steel met steel in flurries of sharp practised blows, each overreach granting the unforgiving teacher another chance to deliver instruction, reminding Wren that even in mock-battles, there is always room for a swift blade to find its target.

"Focus, kid!" he snapped when her dagger went flying for the third time. "Careless form gets one killed on a job."

Wren scowled, snatching up her weapon. "I don't need fancy moves to get the job done."

"Enough pride, more discipline," Klyne shot back sternly. "Your skills excel, but will fail you without control and care. Again!"

Her eyes flashed furiously while the flickering torchlight danced across her sweat-drenched face. Though her small frame cried out for rest, she corrected her stance with gritted teeth, squaring off once

more against the towering Klyne. This time, an unyielding and unshakeable well of resolve drove the girl's strikes that met Klyne's blow for blow, driven by wrath and will alone, where technique faltered.

As the shadows deepened, the clash of sharpened blades and the thud of impact echoed through the training ground. Wren, usually guided by her impulsive nature, seemed fuelled by a newfound resolve. By dusk's end, both were weary, but progress had been made, however grudgingly.

They broke their fast in the flickering light of the campfire, the warmth casting dancing shadows across their faces. Around the crackling flames, they huddled, reviewing plans one last time as mists rose over the darkened woods and swamps, shrouding the landscape in an ethereal haze.

When the sudden resonance of galloping hoofbeats echoed through the night, hands flew to weapon hilts on instinct, prompting wary glances to be exchanged among the trio. Eyes scanned the surrounding shadows, but the sound proved to be a transient disturbance, fading into the distance without materialising into a threat.

The echoes of the hoofbeats dissipated, and tense muscles relaxed once more. A collective sigh of relief stirred through the camp. The pale light of the waning moon only deepened the shadows thrown by swaying trees, lending the surroundings an even more ominous cast.

At length, Klyne rose, lending a callused hand to help the girls tighten straps and sheaths with finality. "Midnight sees you inside the palace walls. May stealth and skill serve you well this night. Stay sharp and do not separate—if you fail to end Lord Zaros, he will see us all to an early grave! Now let's be off whilst moonlight still favours our passage."

Cadie and Wren exchanged nods, their expressions hidden beneath the hoods they pulled over their heads. Then, silent as ghosts and blending into the shadows like spectres on a fateful mission, the young assassins faded into the gloom towards their target and uncertain fate. Come dawn, they would put it all to the test infiltrating the cursed tower that had eluded them for so long, and Lord Zaros would be dead... or they in his dungeons.

## Chapter 8

The moon, obscured by low-hanging clouds, cast sporadic shadows as Wren and Cadie made their way through the filth and decay of back alleys at the outskirts of the capital city. Cloaked in twilight, they moved with purpose yet made no sound, their figures like rats blending seamlessly into the gutter. To anyone taking pains to cast their weary eyes upon them, they would appear just like any other scruffy urchins trying to fade into the darkness as they slunk through the foul underbelly of the city after midnight.

They passed through the merchant districts, once bustling with the activity of peasants, thieves, and the cries of hawkers, but now only silence remained, like a void filled with nameless dread. When the clouds parted, the pale glow of stars revealed row upon row of shuttered shops and houses, stacked like lifeless shells awaiting the dawn that might never come.

Their final destination loomed on the edge of the courtly district, where nobility held sway. Lord Zaros's manor soared on the hill before them, its stones colder than corpses in the night. It was a stately palace with towering spires and imposing parapets that bore witness to wealth and power, arrogance, and ambition. Yet the girls showed no fear. Unfazed by the grandeur, they pressed forward, the pulse of their mission quickening with each step towards the heart of the brewing bloodbath.

As they approached the manor, Cadie nodded to Wren and broke off down a narrow alleyway. Her departure was no mere coincidence but a deliberate strategy to access the servants' entrance in the rear courtyard from the northern side. Meanwhile, Wren went the other way to assess the guards positions. Her hood pulled low, she navigated the alleys with the stealthy arrogance of a cold-blooded killer, moving towards the imposing front of Lord Zaros's residence.

The grandeur of the stone building emerged overhead as Wren approached ever closer. Her gaze flitted across the surroundings, watchful and vigilant. Two guards, armed with pikes and swords, stood sentry on either side of the front door. Torches guttered in the night breeze, cast an uneven glow on the windows of the ground floor. A calculated assessment revealed no rooftop lookouts or patrolling sentries in the immediate vicinity, but the absence of external threats did little to assuage the anticipation of potential dangers within. Guards were to be expected inside the treacherous confines of the manor, and the impending mission demanded a meticulous plan of attack.

Slipping around the side of the palace, Wren vaulted a low garden wall into the mire of the rear courtyard with the grace of a feral cat. Cadie was already there, melding with the darkness beside a weathered wooden door set into the stone facade of the building. Wren crouched beside her. From within her cloak, she retrieved a set of lockpicks.

The lock was simple, made only to keep out drunken servants or starving urchins after dark. Yet each minute it delayed their work seemed painfully long, each click a tolling knell that promised doom should they be discovered in the open enclosure. But at last, the final pin fell into place with a satisfying snap, and Cadie eased the door open, just wide enough for them to slip through, one at a time.

The scents within told of salted meat and aged wine. The kitchens, though at this late hour they should have emptied. Cooks and scullions finished their labours and sought their pallets, dead to the world until the morrow's toils.

The girls moved silently through the scullery like spectres in the deepening twilight. Knives, pots, and skewers hanging from the ceiling and walls glinted in the glimmers from the dying coals, daggers and points sharp as winter. Deeper into the blackness they fled until they entered the long hall where servants scurried in the day, their soft leather boots making no sound on the weary flagstones.

According to the manor plans they had studied, the master bedchamber was high in the tower's eyrie, three full storeys above. The swiftest path wound a side staircase at the end of this hall, where two guards usually stood at its base. More men were expected at the armoury and at the door of Lord Zaros' quarters.

Cadie and Wren flattened themselves into an alcove's shadow as an armoured hound pack passed by, their steel weapons clattering as their boots echoed doom. Once the troop's footsteps faded into silence, the girls emerged like wraiths from the shadows, hands resting on the bone handles of their blades. But as they reached the foot of the winding stair, they found no sentinels present.

Fortune smiled. Wasting no time, they ascended the worn treads, pressing close to the outer wall where the ancient steps were less likely to creak under their slight weight.

The second-floor landing welcomed them with an eerie silence, vacant and devoid of the expected presence of guards. Another stroke of luck. It seemed Lord Zaros had placed his trust in the opulence of his palace, never anticipating that the dagger in his throat would snuff the life within the heart of his own gilded halls. Only a tyrant, both loathsome and witless, believes himself without foe under his own painted roof beams. This overconfidence was the assassins' ally, but Zaros's fatal flaw.

The air was thick with the scent of polished wood and perfumed candles, a stark contrast to the dank alleys the assassins navigated only hours earlier. The quiet of the grand residence heightened their senses, making each creak of the floorboard or rustle of fabric resonate like a heartbeat in the depths of the beast's lair.

The third floor unfolded before them, consisting of a single expansive corridor leading to the heart of Lord Zaros's inner sanctum. Torches lined the stone walls, their maws spewing steady light that left little room for shadows to hide their movements. They would have to approach their target fast and low.

Wren and Cadie slunk forward, their small bodies close to the ground. Each step was measured, and every breath held, as if the air itself might betray their presence.

The first guard they encountered stood at the other end of the corridor. The face leering beneath the helm belonged to a savage looking brute of a man, cruel as his weaponry, but oblivious to the approaching peril. His expression was as barbaric as his appearance. Rigged in chainmail and a set of bladed instruments of death, both long and ugly, he cast a formidable shadow.

Reaching for an arrow held in the quiver on her back, Wren set it swiftly in her crossbow with the practised ease of one long accustomed to the dance of death. It took her less than two heartbeats to lodge it firmly at the base of the guard's thick neck, with only the dull thud of his corpse making the sound as it fell on the cobbled flagstones.

The armoury was their next target. Being a vault of weapons and armour that guarded the path to Lord Zaros's chamber, it held possibly one or more guards stationed there for the night, and they had to silence those before they could deal with Zaros himself.

Wren crept soundlessly down the torch-ribbed passage, her crossbow poised for the impending execution. Cadie followed close in her shadow, sneaking low while flanking the wall, with a glint of steel blade bared between practised fingers.

The stone tiles whispered with the soft padding of their careful steps approaching the armoury door. Wren raised a hand—a signal for Cadie to stay low. With her ear against the wood, she listened for any telltale signs of movement within before carefully peering inside. Through hazy tendrils of smoke, she could make out racks of armour and weapons lining the stone walls, but more importantly, two guards who sat playing dice, their chainmail gleaming dully in the burning firelight of the torches.

The constant flickering of shadows leaping and lunging upon the stone walls cast a chaos of dancing phantoms spawned by guttering flames that played tricks on their senses. The tension in the air was palpable; the anticipation of confrontation as thick as the blood itself.

Wren nodded to Cadie—they had surprise and death on their side. Cadie circled around the other side as Wren took aim with her crossbow. But at that instant, one of the guards glanced up, sensing the portents of his own doom.

"Intruders!" he roared, springing to his feet. His companion drew his sword just as Wren let fly her bolt. It struck true, felling the first guard dead upon the flags where he stood.

Yet his comrade proved swifter than hope itself. Snatching up a nearby breastplate, he whirled it before him, deflecting Cadie's incoming blade with a grinding screech that set her teeth on edge. Cadie hissed in frustration as the man, a hulking figure clad in dented chainmail, now advanced on her with a murderous glint in his eyes.

The steel-clad giant drove her step by crowding step across the flame-lit room as the clashing of steel sang grim refrain within the armoury's walls. But ever focused and unyielding, Cadie patiently lured the brute, with each tactical retreat, further and further into the trap, while narrowly avoiding the sweeping attacks of the hacking iron.

While the two engaged in a deadly dance, Wren worked in frenzied haste to reload her crossbow. But when heartbeats counted, she realised it would take too long. Accepting the urgency of the situation, she crept along the shadowed edges of the chamber, hawk eyes keenly scanning for an opportune moment. And there, along the wall, a stacked glint caught her hunter's sight. Spears lined the stone in patient rows, their lethal points gleaming in the dim light. In a blink of an eye, a plan took shape within her mind.

Swift hands set to work, deftly freeing one of the long staves from its resting place. Hefting the weapon's balance well known to killer's way, she took grim aim. Cadie noticed and threw herself to the floor just as Wren released the spear with all her wiry strength. It knifed true, punching clean through sundered chainmail to bite deep within the guard's ribs and lungs, crushing bone with a sickening crunch. His final cough was sputtered with blood as he collapsed, the breastplate clattering to the cold stone beside him.



The room fell still as death until Cadie sprang up from her defensive crouch, her breath heavy but triumphant. She cast a grateful glance towards Wren, who returned it with a smug grin.

"Good kill," Cadie acknowledged with a laboured breath, and gave Wren an appreciative smile.

Wren retrieved her crossbow with practised ease, a glint of dark satisfaction sharpening her eyes. "What's an assassin without her tricks? Now let's get Zaros and be done with it."

In tandem, the girls darted down the dimly lit corridor, their cloaks billowing behind them. Arriving at the intricately carved door that guarded Lord Zaros's bedchamber, Wren paused and pressed her ear to the ornate wood to catch any sound of life or death within, while Cadie kept watch.

Silence answered. The stillness within the chamber behind the door was oppressive. With a subtle nod, Wren signalled to Cadie that the time had come to test the waters. The handle turned under Cadie's cautious grip, but it yielded no passage. The door was locked.

With lockpick in hand, Wren again set to work. But this time, the lock wasn't the rusty, simple relic they picked in the courtyard. This mechanism was a sophisticated, state-of-the-art bolt that secured itself from within. It faced them like a fiendish puzzle that neither of them had encountered, or even less mastered, before.

Wren examined the lock closely, furrowing her brow in concentration. This mechanism was far more complex than anything she had seen. Multiple pin tumblers glinted defiantly within, daring her to manipulate them all in the precise sequence needed to throw back the bolt.

Minutes dragged by as Wren worked in brooding silence. She inserted her tools gingerly, feeling blind amidst the trap for each tumbler in turn. It was hard to detect their positions through touch alone. After several tense minutes, one tumbled into place with a satisfying clink.

Wren glanced back at Cadie, biting her lip. "This may take some time."

Cadie nodded, keeping watch over her shoulder. They could ill afford to linger here, exposed in the corridor, longer than was necessary. Wren turned back to her work, probing delicately with the tools. Another tumbler gave way after frantic effort. But as she adjusted the third, the second popped back out of place with a spiteful click. Wren suppressed a curse—this lock was proving its mettle.

As she re-aligned the second tumbler, a faint noise came from down the hall.

Cadie slid closer. "Hurry. Someone's coming," she hissed low.

Wren closed her eyes briefly, stilling her racing thoughts. After a calming breath, she set to work with focus sharp as steel, sensing the tumblers through sheer force of will. With an almost imperceptible snick, the final bolt drew back at last.

A sly half-smile tugged at the corner of Wren's lips as she pocketed her picks and turned the release. The door swung open on oiled hinges with barely a whisper, just as heavy footsteps sounded around the corner. The assassins had cut it finer than planned, but they had gained entry.

The darkness and tomb-like silence greeted them once they entered the villain's lair. Too still, Cadie's instincts sounded alarm. Wren drew a calming breath and glided into the gloom, her boots making no sound upon the wooden floor.

Cadie turned and grasped Wren's arm. "Let me do this," she implored her with a whisper, something that Wren hadn't seen her do before. "He killed my mother. This is *my* revenge."

Her pale eyes were glowing with resolve and, after silently agreeing with a nod, Wren let her pass ahead. The silver dagger lay poised firmly in Cadie's hand. A single stab of its steel point could slay a man in seconds, yet the sharp steel's kiss meant quicker end than any tyrant deserved if they stood in her dark path this night.

Behind her, Wren lingered in the hallway, peering through the crack in the door with sly amusement in her eyes. She'll let her savour the kill this time while she kept watch. If she were in Cadie's place, she too would relish the foul moment just as much.

Cadie crept silently further into the room. Inside, tapestries and paintings hung from the walls, while a huge canopied bed dominated the far end of the room. After a while, she could see the shadowy figure emerge, silhouetted on top of the silken sheets of his bed beneath the tall window, some twenty paces away from her. Her knife glinted ominously in the lambent light.

But just then, a board creaked under Cadie's foot, alerting the man to her presence. His eyes went wide at the sight of the cloaked figure stealing towards his rest.

He whipped around, pulling a sword from its scabbard on the wall.

But Cadie was faster.

Before he could even cry for help, Cadie descended upon him in a flurry of flashing steel that delivered a multitude of deadly stab wounds to his neck and chest. This was no assassin's art, only butchery and vengeance, but Cadie enjoyed every second of it. Her mother's death will be repaid here until his entrails were nothing more but slop fit for dogs.

Shock claimed Zaros's face, then panic seized him as he tried to call for guards that would never come. Within moments, his body went slack, the last fires fading from his eyes.

The tyrant lay dead at her feet, his lifeblood pooling darkly across the stone.

Cadie wiped her blade clean, but before she turned to flee, something caught her eye. A small object rested boldly on the bedside table right before her, placed there like a reminder, solely for her finding. She reached gingerly with her fingers and gathered the object in her hand.

Gazing at it for a moment with mournful eyes, she sighed, then tucked it safely within the leather pouch nestled at her neck.

She walked silently across the floor that betrayed her presence, and peered out the open door. "Wren, all clear. Let's..." Her words died as she spotted the empty corridor.

Cadie's eyes narrowed. Wren would not abandon her post unless...

A scream split the air from somewhere below, followed by angry shouts. Cadie cursed and raced for the stairs, fearing they had been betrayed from within.

She emerged into a gallery to find Wren face-to-face with three armed guards, backed against the railing yet grinning fierce as any wolf. "Our friends here thought they'd pay us a visit. I convinced them otherwise."

The guards writhed, moaning upon the cold stone, but more voices were approaching faster than a floodtide. They had no time for explanations or cunning plans.

"Go, now!" Cadie hissed, shoving Wren towards the spiral staircase. Wren darted away with a laugh, while Cadie shot her a dark glance before following suit.

Down through the servants' quarters, they fled, boots pounding the stone. But before they knew it, armed men swarmed the exit, cutting off their escape route. Trapped between the soldiers' closing ranks, Cadie drew her remaining weapon to sell her life dearly. In that moment, a figure clad in a familiar captain's robe emerged from the shadows behind the guards. Wren raised her crossbow, taking aim with eyes that flayed the soul. Three bolts flew with deadly precision. The captain and two men at his side fell in the blink of an eye.

The rest turned in shock, leaving their backs exposed. Cadie was swift to exploit the opening, cutting a bloody path to freedom. As the last man fell, Wren saluted cheekily. "Told you I work better alone. Now let's go before more come crawling!"

With grudging thanks, Cadie followed where Wren led through the servants' twisting passages, down spiral stairs, and across the courtyard once more into the forest's waiting arms.

By dawn's first light, they would reach the rendezvous with Klyne safely. The mission was fulfilled despite the deadly pitfalls.

Cadie regarded Wren with new eyes. "It seems I misjudged your skills. Your hand turned fortune's tide and won our escape. I am... impressed."

Wren preened at such scant praise, and Cadie smiled with an uncommon blush painting her cheeks.

For now, they had survived. Lord Zaros lay dead.

## **Chapter 9**

*Weeks later, after the danger subsided...*

The night came early with a swift, brooding darkness, brought on by a rush of heavy clouds that quickly turned to rain, obscuring the moon's feeble attempt to cast its pale glow upon the earth. The

freezing droplets pelted against the timeworn windows of the house, a steady drumming that matched the rhythm of Cadie's uneasy thoughts.

The fire crackled in the hearth, casting dancing shadows on the walls. But despite the snug surroundings, a disquiet settled upon her. The lethargy that accompanied the warmth, that dangerous lull that threatened to submerge her senses in the depths of drowsiness, sent a shiver down her spine. A good assassin knows that complacency can be a fatal companion. With a subtle shift in her chair, she fought against the encroaching tendrils of weariness, willing her mind to remain sharp and vigilant.

The storm outside mirrored the turmoil within her. Cadie couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, that their every move was anticipated. The rain intensified, tapping on the roof like an urgent message, but its words remained elusive.

In the dim light, her youthful silhouette appeared almost fragile, a deceptive visage that belied the strength within. She was a small thirteen-year-old girl, rather willowy and lean, built as thin as a fox and possessing the same deceptive strength. If one didn't know otherwise, she could almost be mistaken for an average young girl with rolling blond hair kissed by raindrops, albeit a strange one who wore all black and carried five visible weapons.

Her name, a whispered murmur in the clandestine corridors of power, resonated beyond the confines of the kingdom. Cadie, the Urchin of Death, stood as a formidable force, one of the kingdom's two most reliable and deadly assassins. With a casual sip of milk, she yawned and settled deeper into the confines of her warm, comfortable cloak while the storm outside raged on, like a fitting backdrop to the life of shadows she led.

Her accomplice, Wren, sat across from her, a study in contrasts under the dancing flames in the burning heart. Claspng a steaming mug of hot chocolate, she wore an impish grin that swayed on the edge of mischief. Her skin appeared pale in the night, yet a subtle flush adorned her cheeks, like an echo of warmth amidst the night's chill. Her build was like Cadie's, with body concealed under a thin, dark cloak that hinted at the lethal grace beneath.

The liquid-black hair flowed down her back like a midnight waterfall, and a few stray strands fell across her face, befitting raven feathers on freshly fallen snow. With a delicate sweep of her hand, she brushed them aside, revealing eyes that sparkled with a defiance as familiar as the night itself.

"Say, Princess, would you care for a taste of this chocolate?" her fourteen-year-old voice wrapped Cadie like a gentle breeze—soft but insistent. There was a quiet strength in her words, a familiar invincibility that echoed through the air. "It's delicious." A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes.

Cadie shot her a sidelong glance, a hint of feigned annoyance playing on her face. However, the title *Princess* didn't sit well with her. It was a reminder of a life left behind—a life shattered by the cruel hand of fate when it took her mother away. But this time she chose not to unveil the depths of that wound to her impish companion.

"Wren," Cadie chided, her tone balancing between irritation and jest, "you know that you're not supposed to drink that. Sugar makes your body weak."

Wren laughed. "Then why are you the one who looks like they're about to fall asleep?" Tipping her head back, she savoured the remaining chocolate, then wiped a droplet of sweet liquid from her lips. "Are you sure you don't want any? I'll make you some..."

Cadie sighed, resigned. "All right, fine... Just one sip, but no more."

Wren beamed, triumphant. "You'll thank me, Princess," she assured her with a wink, a radiant grin lighting up her pretty face.

Cadie snorted. "Sure, when we're sprawled in a ditch somewhere, bleeding out our lifeblood because you were too fat and slow to defend yourself, I'll be sure to express my gratitude."

"Ah, so young, yet so morbid! Has a life of killing turned you into a cynic already?" She exclaimed, feigning horror.

"No, but I'm the only one of the two of us who still has her survival instinct in check," an angelic smile crept on her little face. "You might want to die young, but me..."

"You what, Princess? Die young with me. I couldn't bear the thought of you old and faded." Her grin softened into an almost tender smile. "Besides," Wren continued, the smirk returning to her face, "what would you be without me?"

"Without you slowing me down, you mean?" Cadie responded, her silver eyes twinkling in the firelight. "A crippled turtle could outrun you in a hundred paces."

Wren looked hurt. "Your claws strike deep, Princess..." She pouted, a pained expression that surprisingly looked tempting on her. "I'm wounded. Really, I am."

Cadie just stuck out her little pink tongue. Picking up the cup of chocolate that Wren brought her, she drank deeply and smacked her lips.

"Alright, Wren, let me tell you what I'd be without you," she said, attempting to look serious. Wren leaned forward expectantly, waiting for an answer. "Without you..." Cadie paused for a dramatic effect, "I'd be considerably faster and safer."

"Hey, if you don't want the chocolate, hand it over," she told her with a shrug.

"What, so you can be even more of a burden than you already are?"

"Burden? Do I have to remind you that it was me who had to wipe the blood off the floor the night Klyne brought you in? And it was me who had to mop up Cassie-puke after our first job because you couldn't stand the sight of blood?" Wren frowned in mock indignation.

"Don't start with that nonsense again."

"Why not?" Wren queried with a mischievous smirk playing on her lips.

"Because Cassie is not my name, and neither is Princess."

Wren leaned back in her chair with a frown creasing her forehead. She shut her eyes and silently sipped her chocolate. "It's meant to be a compliment," Wren said. "But being compared to a crippled turtle is just annoying."

"Oh, don't get so huffy about it," Cadie scowled. "That's why I don't like you eating all that sugar. It makes you so damn moody..."

Cadie looked up, immediately regretful, but Wren shut her eyes, choosing to ignore her, feigning indifference. Mommy's little Princess... How did she get stuck with such an idiotic—

Something touched Wren's leg, and she froze. A foot, a light, playful touch...

"Wren?"

Wren reluctantly opened one eye and shot her a quick glance. Cadie's eyes were the colour of a nighttime pond, looking out at her with a strange expression... Wren diverted her gaze and focused on her cup.

"Wren..."

But Wren avoided looking up, wary of those unfamiliar, longing eyes. "Yes?"

"Wren, you know..." Cadie's voice was like silk, soft and caressing, yet strangely clumsy and still very childlike. "I might complain, but..." Her small foot, still touching Wren, inched a bit higher, pressed a little firmer along the other girl's calf and underneath her knee. She glanced up at Wren with something between confusion and desire. "I didn't mean the things I said about you. You're not slow, and you've saved us on more than a few occasions. I wouldn't feel safe with anyone else on the job, not even with Klyne, the way I feel with you," she looked away, as if lost in thought.

"It might sound stupid, I guess, but..." Cadie's shoulders rippled in a shrug, and she let her hair cascade in front of her pale face as she looked down to the floor. "I get scared when I imagine being away from you." Cadie withdrew her foot away from Wren, and Wren was almost able to convince herself that it had been an accidental touch.

"Come on, Cadie, it's bedtime," Wren said, though secretly, she wished she could look into Cadie's eyes to comfort her and to let her say and do whatever it was that she needed to express, all at once... if only she wasn't afraid of the feelings it might stir.

"I'm not beautiful," Cadie's voice dropped to a hushed tone, an assassin's whisper on a mission. It wasn't what she had expected to say, and she swallowed, embarrassed, looking at the floor as the first blush painted her cheeks.

Wren slid her chair closer to Cadie, panicking her at first when she moved. Leaning towards her, she tipped so close that she could feel Cadie's gentle breath tickling the skin of her face. Sapphire eyes and the tip of Cadie's little nose dominated her field of vision.

"Hmm... Looks pretty to me," she whispered, settling back into her seat, but unsure of what to say or do next. This was not the usual terrain of combat or the cutthroat world she was familiar with. This was

unlike anything she was used to, what she was trained to do. Navigating Cadie's sudden sentimentality was nothing like gutting the soft flesh of their targets.

"Not like you," Cadie assured her, seeking out her eyes. "Sometimes..." Her gaze shifted away. "Sometimes I just watch you, like tonight... You're like a dream—you don't vanish with the morning light... but you're distant, though, and impossible to touch. You're like the moon... Always present, always predictable, but never understood, and far away..."

"Cadie, I'm right here. Don't make the moon smack you upside the head," she laughed and put a hand on Cadie's shoulder. "Now come on, it's time for us to get some sleep."

But Cadie stood her ground. "No, Wren..." She shook her head energetically, twirling silken hair around her like dreams spun from gold. "No, you don't understand, Wren. We're not little girls anymore..."

"You're thirteen, Cadie, and I'm a year older. I think we're still kids."

However, Cadie persisted as if she hadn't heard what Wren said, her soft voice intertwining with Wren's. "I'm a bad assassin, because I'm supposed to concentrate on the mission, but..." she seemed carried along by her words, faster and more desperate with each second. "...but I can't. You're so carefree yet always focused. I get distracted by things I was never meant to care about. I'm a bad assassin because I'm in love—" she broke off, biting down on her words, then glanced up at Wren for a terrified instant, returning her gaze to the floor. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Because I'm in love with you..."

"You're... what!?" Wren giggled.

"I think I love you, Wren."

"Well, don't love me, Cadie." Her voice was like the blade of a dagger, deliberately kept low and quiet so she couldn't hear it wavering. "You're meant to be an assassin, not a flirt."

Cadie stared at her for a second, disbelieving what she'd just heard. Then, her beautiful face crumpled, head slumping forward like a wilted flower, delicate hands clenching at nothing. Her breath came in uneven gasps, like a child poisoned, and her tiny shoulders quivered, barely noticeable. A cascade of hair fell in front of her face like a veil to hide her shame.

"Cadie, I..." Wren gently traced the curve of her shoulder, hesitant at first, but when Cadie eventually looked up with tears teetering on the brink of her wide eyes, Wren offered a smile.

"Cadie, don't cry. I'm here..." the girl whispered, almost about to cry herself. Why was she doing this to her? Why tonight? Why now? Weren't things perfectly fine the way they were? Why did she have to use that terrifying word?

Wren continued to stroke Cadie's hair in an attempt to calm her while whispering softly, something she'd told her once that her mother had done. A shiver ran through her as the silky strands tickled her palms, sending a tingling sensation to her fingertips. Cadie's eyes caught on Wren's every movement, a gaze that might have unsettled others, but Wren didn't move away.

Finally, Cadie spoke, "So... so you don't hate me for falling in love? I can still be your partner?" she managed to say.

"Of course I don't hate you," Wren tried to laugh. "Besides, who would watch my back if you were gone?" She gave a soft smile.

"Speaking of that," Cadie declared, "I don't want to do this anymore. The killing, the fighting, constant danger, and blood... blood everywhere," she shuddered. "I can't do it anymore—being an assassin. After killing Zaros... after finally having my revenge... I thought it would bring satisfaction. But it hasn't. All I feel is emptiness. And every time we embark on a mission, I fear something will happen to one of us, and I... I couldn't go on alone if it happened to you."

"Don't say that, Cadie," she whispered, her plea hanging in the air like a fragile promise. "Don't do this."

"I'm serious, Wren," Cadie insisted, locking eyes with her. "I don't see any purpose in doing this, especially after killing Zaros. I revenged my mother's death. Why should I carry on?"

"Because we have a comfortable life. I don't intend to go back to living on the streets," Wren countered, a note of anxiety swimming in her voice.

"We don't have to, Wren," Cadie reached for the leather pouch hanging around her neck, producing a dazzling necklace bejewelled with sizable diamonds.

Wren's mouth fell open in astonishment. "I never took you for a pickpocket, Cadie. Where in God's name did you steal that thing?"

"I found it in Zaros's room after I killed him. It used to belong to my mother; it was her royal necklace." She looked down at the sparkling gems in her palm. "When I saw it, I thought maybe the diamonds could give us a fresh start. Just think about it, Wren. No more gambling with our lives. No more living in fear and bloodshed."

Wren nodded slowly in understanding. She knew better than anyone that the life of an assassin was a dangerous one, and taking a life could change a person. "What do you have in mind?"

"We could leave Klyne, his sordid deals, and this place behind us. The diamonds in this necklace could sustain us for the rest of our lives," Cadie proposed earnestly. "Let's start over somewhere new, somewhere quiet, where we wouldn't have to live in fear or take lives to survive. We'll have enough funds to set ourselves up, perhaps buy a little cottage, tend to the land. Just live normal, peaceful lives for once."

A faint smile played on Wren's lips. The idea was certainly enticing after years spent refining their lethal skills. Yet there lingered a trace of uncertainty as well.

"It would be an adjustment. After everything we've been through, settling into normal lives might not be so simple."



"I know," Cadie admitted. "But I want to try if you're there with me. I'm tired of watching over my shoulder, of the constant worry about what might happen to you or me. With the money from this diamonds, we could make a clean start somewhere safe from our enemies and just live simply. No more violence or secrets—we'd be free." She looked at Wren with hope in her eyes. "What do you think? Will you come with me?"

Wren took Cadie's hand in her own, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She had always regarded Cadie as a little sister, had always been her protector, watching out for her whenever they were in danger. While the prospect of change was daunting, she knew Cadie spoke the truth—the relentless danger in their current life had taken its toll.

"I'll go wherever you go, Cadie. Let's see what peace feels like."

Cadie moved faster than Wren would have thought possible, her hands holding onto her in a surprisingly powerful grip as she pressed herself against Wren, crushing her in a tight hug.

Taken aback, Wren was too surprised to pull away, her mind perplexed with abashment and confusion. When Cadie's lips brushed against hers with a hesitant touch, a tremulous quiver passed through her body.

At first, it was barely a stroke, like skimming lips over silk—a subtle nudge, reminiscent of the gentle caress of Cadie's foot under the table. Wren hesitated, not pulling away but unsure how to respond, uncertain if she should or even wanted to.

Wren began to pull back, teetering between relief and disappointment, until she felt Cadie's moist lips on hers again, pressing stubbornly against hers in a gentle but assertive rhythm—a polite yet bold request to pertain her love. Wren pulled slightly back once more, but Cadie sensed the rhythm now and was ready. The third kiss came, fervent and bold. She kissed her hungrily, demandingly, and forcefully enough to push Wren's head back against the chair. Her warm, slippery tongue found its way between Wren's lips, and to Cadie's surprise, she allowed it.

Wren still tasted of hot chocolate. Cadie's tongue explored inside her mouth, something that should have been alarming only moments ago, but somehow wasn't any longer. Hesitantly, Wren kissed her back, all the while grappling with the urge to pull away, caught up in the rhythm and the pleasure that washed over her like a river, threatening to sweep her away and carry her to uncharted regions.

Eventually, Wren broke the rhythm and withdrew before the kiss reached its crescendo. Cheeks aflame, she shut her eyes and turned her face aside. A trembling hand rose to wipe away the traces of moisture left by Cadie's kiss on her lips. It was impossible to bring her mind to attention, to think of anything except the fact that, had she been standing, she probably would have fallen into Cadie's arms.

Cadie's hands retained their possessive hold on Wren—one around her bare shoulder, the other at her slender waist. Her leg remained entwined around Wren's, but the embrace suddenly felt to Wren like a trap. A vision of past enemies closing in on her flashed before her eyes, prompting her to push Cadie's arms away and pull herself free of her grasp.

Surprised and dejected, Cadie let go of her and sat with her eyes fixed on the floor, waiting for Wren to unleash her fury at her.

But none came.

After a while, Cadie murmured, "I'm sorry..." in a voice that held a turmoil of satisfaction and regret. "I guess you really hate me now."

"Shut up," Wren spat, swiping away a tear from the corner of her eye. "Just shut up."

Cadie attempted to reach for her, to console her, but Wren pushed her away. "Don't touch me. Leave me alone."

"All right..." Cadie rose, revealing the pain in her own voice. "I won't bother you any more. I'm going to sleep." Wren felt a sudden, heavy weight in her lap when Cadie passed by her side. It was none other but the royal necklace that had once belonged to Cadie's mother. "If you want to stay in another room, I understand. If you want to leave and never come back, I understand that too."

A hand rested on Wren's shoulder, causing her to flinch again. "You're beautiful, Wren. I want to show you just how beautiful you are..." The words whispered into her ear, the soft breath rustling her hair.

Wren wanted to push her away and fall into her arms at the same time. She never wanted to see Cadie again, and then she wanted to kiss her again and again.

"Leave me alone; just leave me alone!" her strained voice hissed. "Why did you do that?"

Cadie's voice was low and soft in her ear. "Because... I love you."

Wren opened her mouth to voice her protest, but fell into silence when Cadie lightly kissed her cheek with barely a touch. "Why didn't you stop me?"

Wren turned to face her, astonished. Why hadn't she stopped her? "I... don't know, Cadie... Because..." She turned away. Because I couldn't? Because I liked it? Because I was too scared, too surprised, too confused? Because... you're beautiful, not me.

Wren turned around again to answer her, but Cadie was gone. Up the hall, the door to their room creaked shut. She looked out the window at the rain that smashed itself against the glass, trying to get inside, and thought, sipping at what was left of her chocolate.

Eventually, as the storm slowly settled into a dim pattering of rain, its emotions all but spent, she stood and walked up the stairs. Opening the door to their room, she stepped inside.

Cadie lay curled up in a ball on the bed, clutching the blankets, her face unusually serene as she slept. A damp patch marked the pillow where she had buried her face. Her shoes and coat rested in a small pile at the foot of the bed, neatly folded, when Wren approached her; but she didn't awaken.

"So you cried yourself to sleep..."

Cadie didn't stir at the sound of her voice. "You little idiot, why did you do that? You know, I'm not supposed to love you..." Wren sat on the side of the bed, removing her boots, and Cadie stirred slightly

in her sleep. "I'm not supposed to love... And neither are you... So why do you love me?" The sleeping girl didn't answer. "Can't you just stop? Put everything back the way it was? I'm scared, Cadie..." Leaning over, she brushed the hair from Cadie's face. "Were you scared too when I said that? Did you really think I'd leave you?"

Wren reached out for the sleeping girl's familiar little hand and pressed it against her lips. Cadie stirred from her sleep and turned to face her. Without thinking, Wren drew closer, kissing her lightly on her parted lips, then slipped into bed beside her like she always did. She kept her hand in hers, though—it felt right.

"Do you forgive me?" Cadie asked, her eyes glowing in the darkness like two fireflies.

"Forgive what, Cadie? I like you just the way you are," she smiled. "Go to sleep now. Tomorrow, we'll be gone before the morning breathes its first light."

"So you'll leave with me?" Cadie clasped her hand possessively, drawing her nearer. "Wren... Do you love me?"

"You fool, I loved you from the first day I saw you."

## **Epilogue**

The pale rays of dawn were washing over the fields when Wren stirred from her slumber. She gazed tenderly at Cadie's sleeping form beside her, tracing a gentle finger along her jaw. Soon they will be on their way from this place for good, disappear without a word to sever their last ties binding them to this dark life. But what lay beyond, Wren could hardly dare imagine.

Rising quietly so as not to wake Cadie yet, she began gathering their few possessions. Extra clothes were secured in their shoulder bags, spare shoes slid into worn leather pouches. Only the essentials were taken—blades, arrows, lockpicks, and everything else would be left behind them, along with their old names and aliases. The Urchins of Death were no more. Now only life and love will rule their lives.

As the sun's first light filtered through the window, Cadie began to stir. Seeing Wren packing, understanding dawned in her eyes. This was finally happening. Without a word, Cadie began helping, folding blankets and pouches with care.

When all was prepared, Wren took Cadie's hands in hers. "It's time," she said softly. Cadie nodded, emotions swirling in her gaze—fear of the unknown, yet hope and excitement for what lay ahead without constant danger casting its shadow over their lives. Together they stood, shouldering their packs in the glow of a new dawn.

Stepping out into the predawn path misted with morning dew, the sky was painted in hues of blue and gray, the air quiet but for birdsong. They walked close but not touching, more accustomed to hiding what flourished between them in shadowed corners. Now out in the open, it felt almost thrilling to simply be together, even in the company of none but empty fields and flowing mountain water in that familiar creek of their childhood.

At the edge of the forest, where the dirt path joined the main road, they paused, and Wren drew Cadie into her arms, holding her tight. "Whatever comes, we face it side by side as we always had," she vowed. Cadie tipped her head up to capture Wren's lips in a sweet, chaste kiss.

With the sun cresting over distant hills, bathing the world in gold, Wren took Cadie's hand and led her out onto the open road. Behind lay their past—ahead an unwritten future, uncertain but bright with hope and love freely shared.

A new dawn had come.

The End